An Unorthodox Dinner

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An Unorthodox Dinner

by Ratbagqueen

Summary

When one day Will finds a dinner invitation in his mailbox, he doesn't do what any sane man would; he doesn't give Jack a call. Even though Hannibal must have made plans not only for dinner, but also for him. Then again, these days Will is no longer a puppy either.

"Something is amusing," Hannibal said gently.

"You. Me," was all he said.

"Incredibly so," Hannibal agreed dryly, watching the shirt slip from his shoulders. Will could virtually feel him tracing the slight flush that began at his throat and unfurled on his chest. Hannibal's gaze mapped his body and dipped low suddenly, having discovered the marring scar. The light spilled golden on Will's skin, doing little to disguise its irregular, puckered contours. Hannibal's face showed no remorse. To Will's relief, he didn't insult him with an apology.

Hannibal looked up. "It's an interesting position we find ourselves in, is it not?"

Notes

See this Tumblr post for the deets.

I can’t thank my fierce betas, Evil "if you use 'whimper', I will quit" Jenna and Beau "what about his 'baguette magique?'" chateau, enough! All the love. Any remaining errors are either due to my non-nativeness or stubbornness.

And thank you, Fannibals, for keeping this fandom alive and amazing. I, embarrassingly late to the dinner table, felt instantly at home.

Chapter 1

I lived alone but I was only
Coming back to you.

-- Coming back to you / Leonard Cohen

At last Will's life had slipped into a daily grind, a self-imposed humdrum that would come natural to most. Jack still pestered him about cases occasionally, and every so often a blood-drenched dream bathed him in sweat, but most days he now spent in his own mind. Anarchy always lurked there regardless of his dormant empathy. Lingering traces of mad minds had an uncanny tendency to seep into his thoughts at random.

These days only one of Jack's monsters dominated his thoughts, chasing other violent interferences to the periphery.

This Saturday morning, Will was braving lesser demons. Pushing back against gusts of wind and rain, he made his daily trip to his mailbox, ignoring the fact that he seldom got any mail to speak of. Regularity and exercise were key, according to his former physical therapist. Will still meekly followed his advice, even though months had passed and sometimes his surgical scar still throbbed.

He knew only too well his alternative. His exercises, his monthly check-ups at the hospital and his trips into civilization; he could give it all up in a heartbeat and slip through the cracks of society. If not for that persistent seed of unfulfillment that festered within him, he might have done so months ago.

But instead, he kept going. And he kept waiting.

Not for the first time he tortured himself by wondering if Hannibal spared him a thought on days like these. A November storm was brewing over the Patapsco river and the first ominous clouds had ventured landward to Wolf Trap. His scar, as good a weather forecast as any, stung something fierce as a result. As a former surgeon, Hannibal must be aware of this phenomenon. He had enjoyed leaving his signature on his victims, multi-layered puzzles for work-weary coroners. Perhaps the notion of having left a ruthless memento on Will, his very own permanent mark, would please him in a similar way.

The rain intensified. Unconsciously, Will balled his hands into fists. Once he reached his mailbox, he flexed his stiff fingers and pulled it open.

Shaking his head, he tried to shrug off the futile intensity of his thoughts. More probable was a scenario in which Hannibal had flawlessly blended in with the upper crust of some

Southern European country, distracted by its rich history and his new acquaintances, and entirely oblivious of Wolf Trap's local weather conditions.

Will sighed. He had told Hannibal that he found him interesting, knowing perfectly well how inadequately the word described the extent of his “interest”. Hannibal had made him thrive with dark potential—he wouldn’t dismiss that uneasy truth anymore—then thrown and trampled him.

And now he threw Will again.

On top of a stack of advertisements in his mailbox sat an envelope that would have been inconspicuous if not for the old-world flamboyance of the handwritten address. He should hardly be surprised, knowing better than anyone never to exclude the boldest possibilities when it came to Hannibal. But at the sight of his name, Hannibal’s existence suddenly became so palpable that adrenaline surged. Sharply sucking in cold air, Will had to grasp the mailbox post for balance.

For several moments he stood there, waiting for his frenzied nerves to process the stimulant overdose and his wobbly legs to hold their own. Rain swept over him, soaking his curls flat against his skull and leaking into his eyes. He squinted at the envelope until the letters began to swim.

Winston, who had followed him outside, wagged his wet tail against his leg until he jerked. Wind had gotten hold of his scarf. Its chilly fingers wormed their way into his coat and underneath his sweater, leaving goosebumps in their wake. He plucked the tail of his scarf from the air and wiped it roughly across his wet face before wrapping it around his neck again. Then he gripped the shutter of the mailbox, ready to slam it closed.

Midway, his hand faltered.

“Goddammit!” He smashed his fist into the side of the mailbox.

The sense of futility that had started to gnaw at him when he’d lain bedridden in the hospital had grown into a sharp-toothed monster over the months, crippling his progress, whatever that might entail at this point. Winter was creeping up on Wolf Trap now. The days grew shorter and drearier, and with them Will’s inability to suppress his exasperation, a stealthy trespasser in his thoughts that whispered promises of a life consigned to oblivion.

If a feeling more debilitating than worthlessness existed, it presently eluded him.

He might as well face it. He was trapped. Consequently, justice didn’t seem as crucial anymore as it had when his sutures were still fresh.

And so he did not slam his mailbox shut. He did not call Jack and retreat into his house to lie low on the couch with a pile of dogs on top of him, waiting for the FBI to deal with the Chesapeake Ripper. With an eagerness that frightened him, he raked his mail into his arm.

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Of course Hannibal had not sent him something as grotesque as a *Get well soon!* card. He may have leisurely tipped Will's world off balance again, but he'd done so courteously. He requested the *pleasure* of Will's company for canapés and dinner this upcoming Friday night. All guests were expected at 6.30 PM.

If he had ulterior motives, they didn't transfer onto the perfectly crisp dinner invitation that was every bit as offensively ordinary, except that there was no telephone number and the Baltimore address was unfamiliar. That was hardly remarkable. Hannibal's old house had been overrun by the FBI and was likely still under surveillance.

"Just like old times, huh?" Will muttered, turning the card over and scrutinizing the blank back as if he expected a message to magically appear there. *Bring your own knife*.

So when he had just the other day waved away Alana's concerns that he was making Wolf Trap into a voluntary prison, Hannibal had resumed throwing lavish dinner parties right under the FBI's noses. If he had ever even stopped.

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For the rest of the week, Will ran errands. Alana would be proud; he left his house. He went grocery shopping. He dutifully went through his daily series of exercises to keep his abdominal muscles strong. He walked the dogs until his breathing became labored and his shirt started to irritate his scar. He stuck to going to bed around midnight and taking a shower each morning. Twice, he accidentally toweled himself dry too roughly, rubbing puckered scar tissue raw before shooting pain could warn him off.

On Wednesday evening, he carried a boat engine into the living room and dismantled it just to see if he still had a knack for it. He then mulled over the feasibility of tinkering with boat parts for a living. It wouldn't give him purpose, but he'd settle for the small kindness of distraction. Besides, making a buck would help him refuse doing gigs for the FBI. Since there was no incentive to clean up his mess, he left the reassembled engine and his equipment scattered around the living room floor, removing only the sharp tools so that his dogs wouldn't hurt themselves.

If possible, he felt more restless than he had in months.

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Thursday evening, while sitting on the couch with a microwave meal, he gave Jack a call and learned that the FBI were following a meager lead into Hannibal's whereabouts in Italy. Jack was frustrated: the investigation was slow going. Will hung up before the man could make ill-disguised demands and their conversation would turn stale. He didn't mention the invitation.

He dropped his phone on the couch and stared at his cooling food, then stood abruptly and paced into the kitchen with the plate, dumping the remainders of his meal into the trash. Picking up on his shifting mood, his dogs kept their distance. But when he ripped open a bag of dog food too rashly and its contents spilled over the kitchen tiles, their resolve dissipated instantly and they came running.

In the ensuing chaos of dogs yapping, barking and chasing food, Will leaned back against the countertop. He took in the spectacle unfolding before him with unfocused eyes and sighed. Sins of omission. A better man, a sane man, wouldn't have withheld this from Jack.

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Friday came and almost went. The storm clouds had blown East during the day and the rain had slacked off. A watery sun appeared just long enough to go down behind the Western slope of forest, streaking the sky with tentative shades of red. Will, who had felt agitated all day, soaked in a bath until his fingertips and toes wrinkled. The cooling water sloshed around him when he finally clenched the sides of the tub and pushed himself up.

"I give up," he said to himself, grimacing. "*Baltimore*. It's just too risky. Even for a bastard with a God Complex."

Cautiously toweling himself dry, he eyed his dog hair-covered sweatpants and sweaty shirt, then walked naked to the bedroom closet to hunt for relatively clean clothes. He somehow still managed to startle himself when his eyes fell on his most decent outfit: a grey shirt and a pair of navy pants that he saved for "special occasions", like the first FBI class he had taught. And Beverly's funeral.

He lifted the shirt off the hanger, ordering Winston, who followed him with single-minded devotion ever since he'd come out of the hospital, to stay back. Having lost muscle, he would likely drown in it, but it was miraculously free of dog hair.

"I might as well wear it to another funeral," he told Winston wryly.

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Chasing the retreating clouds, the wind had died down only hours ago, now a bare whisper in the quiet uptown Baltimore street that Will parked on, just out of sight of Hannibal's new

hiding place. Dusk had fallen quite suddenly and he flicked on the interior light to collect his coat and the bottle of wine he'd picked up on his way over. In the rear-view mirror, he caught sight of himself. His eyes were too bright.

He flicked off the light, cut the engine and sat in the dark for a while. His heart was beating with a strange excitement. This, he thought, was what living on borrowed time should feel like.

It was overgrown with ivy and surrounded by an impenetrable hedge of conifers, but otherwise Hannibal's new house was as impressive as his old one. It rose into the darkening sky, lights gleaming invitingly behind its windows. Will shook his head. If this was not a mouse trap, then what made Hannibal think he wouldn't turn up with the entire Baltimore FBI squad in tow?

Peculiarly, revenge wasn't first and foremost on his mind. He didn't have a clear concept of why he presently found himself on Hannibal's porch other than a persistent longing for an escape from his monotonous life.

If Hannibal were to be caught by the FBI in a world that was at his feet, Will didn't think he'd be imprisoned like him: completely, body and mind robbed of stimuli. No, he would persuade his surroundings into complying with his desires. And his memory palace would be a rich substitute for what his prison lacked.

But, Will knew, Hannibal could get lonely too.

Part of him still sought to appease the man: he rang the doorbell at 6.30 PM sharp. He didn't know what to expect, couldn't for the life of him imagine Hannibal disguised as a blue-collar worker. But he was still taken aback when it turned out that Hannibal hadn't even bothered.

Though the place might have been different, Hannibal opened the front door in his all too familiar European splendor, his frame highlighted by the light from a chandelier in the hallway. He wore a steel blue pinstripe suit and vest, and a white shirt with a spread collar that accentuated the matching jacquard paisley tie and pocket square. A charming smile completed his look. It struck Will that Hannibal appeared dressed for a grand finale.

"Will! I was not sure you would accept my invitation. I'm glad you did. It's good to see you."

"Dr. Lecter."

Hannibal didn't attempt to grasp his hand or touch him in any way. Will thought he probably looked too tense, perhaps even unsettled, for that. But his eyes were warm and traveled over Will with concern and appreciation, before sliding subtly past him to search the darkness of the street.

"I'm alone." Will thrust the bottle he'd bought into Hannibal's hands.

"Ah, *Casillero del Diablo*." Hannibal returned his gaze to him, easily assured, and with some chagrin Will concluded that so far his behavior had been perfectly predictable. "This will go splendidly with the meatier canapés, thank you."

“Yes well, I could hardly turn up empty-handed after you so kindly spared my life.”

Inadvertently invited, Hannibal’s eyes sought out Will’s belly, where only a thin layer of fabric hid the marring scar from its inflictor. Will’s abdomen clenched in response, instinctively fearing a repeat performance of intestines tumbling out and christening the polished marble of Hannibal’s hallway. But he didn’t feel the urge to stumble out of the door and into the camouflaging darkness.

Will smirked to himself. If he had not evolved, he must be broken beyond repair. Imposing and naturally domineering, the man who had gutted him stood before him, and he wasn’t seized by fear.

If anything, he was thrilled.

Whatever he was here for, it wasn’t nugatory inquiries into his health and empty apologies. He cut in before Hannibal could speak. “Aren’t you going to show me around?”

After a moment of silence, Hannibal said, “Of course. Let me shut out the cold behind you,” and carefully side-stepped him. Will thought that Hannibal possibly feared that he might still run off into the night. He had no such plans, but when the lock slotted into place with an audible click, the spacious hallway immediately felt cramped. The feeling of being entombed in a mausoleum of marble crept up on him.

From somewhere inside the house a woman laughed. That was right; they weren’t alone. Will shrugged out of his coat before Hannibal had a chance to offer assistance and wordlessly walked into the living room. Hannibal’s leather Oxfords clacked on the floor as he followed closely behind.

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A heady scent of leather clung to the cognac-colored Barcelona chair in which Will sat. The entire house was obviously newly-furnished, but even the fire crackling cozily in the hearth and the soft-looking furs in front of it could not hide the sterile atmosphere, like that of a showroom. Hannibal’s touch, his historical objects and trophies, his European antique ware and paintings were sorely missing. Only a fraction of his former book collection had survived the abrupt move, and now claimed the far wall of the room.

Besides Will, a middle-aged couple that radiated *nouveau riche*, the Van Dykes, had been invited. The woman sat in a fuchsia-colored suit and a cloud of lilies and jasmine that, Will thought with malicious delight, must secretly drive Hannibal insane. Next to her on the sofa, her husband was telling Will all about the businesses he owned in a tone of voice that betrayed that he’d shared this monologue many times before. Will studied the man instead of listening. All his hair had seemingly migrated from his now bald head to gather like a savage forest around the cave of his mouth.

Hannibal's choice of guests was the only apparent sign of his fall from grace. They must have something to answer for if they chose to mingle with a wanted fugitive, but Will dismissed the Van Dykes as small players. He felt ill-at-ease regardless, as if he were part of an orchestrated play in which everyone performed their roles with gusto and he was the only one without a script.

Hannibal reappeared from the kitchen with more food. He was serving a plethora of intricate-looking miniature dishes. As he displayed them on silver platters and tiered dishes on the coffee table, he demonstrated that living the life of an outlaw hadn't affected his creative debauchery in the slightest. Will idly wondered if he indulged the Chesapeake Ripper still.

He had rationed himself to two glasses of wine. Taking small sips, he let the chit-chat wash over him. Hannibal didn't attempt to involve him. He noticed that Hannibal, too, ate and drank sparingly. Mr. Van Dyke had them covered. He was raking in canapés as if fearing a great famine. Will zeroed in on the specks of wood-smoked ham that nested in his beard, and discovered a third one in his mustache. It took him a moment to become aware of Hannibal speaking directly to him.

"I'm afraid it's not much compared to my former one, but I could show you my Casillero del Diablo later, if that would please you?"

Raising his voice, Will said, "I'm sure we'd all look forward to seeing the *Cellar of the Devil* with our own eyes." His smile sat phony on his face.

"Oh dear! We would have loved to unravel another of Hannibal's dirty little secrets," Mrs. Van Dyke winked at Will. "But I'm afraid we're not staying for dinner, are we, George?"

"Amalia is right." George picked up what looked like a roasted bird's foot and eyed it skeptically, then shrugged. Around the bones crackling in his mouth he said, "We are leaving for the airport at 5 AM tomorrow to visit our son, who is studying at the University of Oxford. If it were anyone but Dr. Lecter, we would have declined the invitation."

Will's inelegant "Oh" was met with a moment of silence in the formal extravagance of the room.

"And I'm glad you and your lovely wife decided to join us for drinks and some bites," Hannibal cut in smoothly, standing up to refill wine glasses. He briefly placed a hand on Will's shoulder. Will went still under his touch. His every nerve tingled with apprehension, or anticipation; he couldn't tell. When Hannibal pulled away, the phantom heat of his hand stayed with Will. He fought the impulse to brush it off.

"Well," Hannibal said, smiling down on Will, "it seems that you and I will enjoy a private dinner, Will. More wine?"

"Please." He held out his glass, ration be damned. There was no doubt in his mind that Hannibal had handpicked his guests for this evening based solely on their inability to stay for dinner. He took a large swig.

Conversation returned to inconsequential topics. The Van Dykes soon appeared to forget Will's presence altogether, drawn instead to Hannibal's natural charm.

A final canapé, a miniature dessert, arrived. Save for the edible violets sprinkled on the plate, at first glance it was an unexpectedly modest-looking dish. A single white chocolate egg that Will thought he'd be able to buy at his local supermarket around Easter. Maybe shopping for exclusive ingredients proved complicated when your mug was plastered all over Baltimore and beyond.

Then Hannibal poured a hot redcurrant and boysenberry sauce on top of it and the ball slowly unfolded like a flower. White chocolate petals collapsed onto the plate, revealing the egg's inner core: a colorful entremet. The Van Dykes showered Hannibal in compliments while Will stared at his plate. The sauce's resemblance to fresh blood was striking. And gorgeous.

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While Hannibal said his goodbyes to the Van Dykes at the front door, Will wandered to the bookcase against the far wall, marveling at the fact that considering his precarious position, Hannibal had managed to secure a decent section of his former collection. Will mentally browsed through Hannibal's list of acquaintances and realized that, depressingly, even the most upstanding citizen could be lured into misguided loyalty under the man's flattering ministrations, and turn into an accomplice.

He selected a book at random and thumbed through it, feigning interest while from the corner of his eye he closely watched the door for Hannibal's return. The scent of old, yellowed paper wafted from the pages and, looking down, he saw that it was a poetry collection and quite possibly, because Hannibal was particular like that, an early edition. He skimmed back to the colophon to confirm his hunch.

"Konstantinos Petrou Kavafis. Or C.P. Cavafy, a Nineteenth century Alexandrian Greek poet," Hannibal said behind him, too close. Will swiveled around, nearly dropping the book.

"Pardon. I didn't mean to startle you." He had taken off his suit jacket and stood before Will in all his casual glory. White shirt sleeves neatly rolled to show smooth, muscled arms, he held a glass of wine in each hand. "Dinner does not require much preparation. So I thought we would enjoy another glass of wine first and catch up."

Of course you didn't mean to startle me, Will thought, *sneaking up on people just comes with the job*. He accepted the glass with only the slightest tremor of his fingers. To give himself something to do other than stare at Hannibal moodily, he turned a page, holding the book clumsily in one hand.

"Ah," Hannibal said pleasantly, looking down at the pages spread in front of him. Closing what little distance there was between them, he slid a supportive hand under the book's spine, only barely avoiding touching Will's fingers.

“Alas, I have yet to discover a translation that does the original justice. If only Melville, who translated Ovid’s ‘Metamorphoses’ with spectacular freshness, would try his luck at Cavafy. But even inadequately translated, this poem is nevertheless one of his best-known works.”

Oblivious to Will’s discomfort, or uncaring, he began reciting the second verse, his voice dipping a fraction.

“*You won’t find a new country, won’t find another shore.*
This city will always pursue you. You will walk
the same streets, grow old in the same neighborhoods,
will turn gray in these same houses.
You will always end up in this city. Don’t hope for things elsewhere:
there is no ship for you, there is no road.
As you’ve wasted your life here, in this small corner,
you’ve destroyed it everywhere else in the world.”

When he finished, it seemed that the air was heavy with foreboding, with the faint scent of Hannibal’s expensive aftershave mingled with woodsmoke and the hint of alcohol on his breath. Will parted his lips to breathe through his mouth instead of his nose, unprepared for the assault of Hannibal’s close proximity on his senses. Unprepared to linger on how deceptively good the man smelled.

Hannibal looked at him sideways, quirking an eyebrow.

“He didn’t seem like the most optimistic fellow.” Will closed the book and brusquely shoved it back into the bookcase.

“The beauty of poetry is that apart from its prosaic ostensible meaning, you can distill your own preferred meaning from its language. This poem, for example, you may treat as a gloomy story for a rainy day, or a warning to be content with what life offers. Possibly it holds the advice that you must cease resisting fate and open your eyes, or suffer the consequences.” Hannibal regarded him for a moment, then said: “Shall we sit by the fire?”

Will followed him back to their chairs, frowning at his words, while Hannibal continued to tell him, conversationally, that most of Cavafy’s nameless heroes had nothing to look forward to and everything to look back on, and that regret was the recurring theme in his work.

As they took their respective seats opposite each other, the sofa now blissfully empty, Will was reminded of the familiarity of their positions. Another place in time, another world. He let his eyes travel over the leftover canapés on the coffee table and wondered what Hannibal would bring to the table tonight.

“You may have my copy if you’re interested?”

“Hm? No, thanks.”

Hannibal lifted his glass and said, unsmiling, “To new beginnings?”

“To endings gone awry.”

Hannibal parted his lips, a hint of wistfulness, of pensiveness in his eyes. Then he merely inclined his head, slowly swirled the wine in his glass, inhaled, and took a heedful sip. They sat like that for a few moments, sipping wine and watching each other over the rim of their glasses.

Will glanced around. “Nice place,” he said nonchalantly.

“Thank you. It leaves something to be desired, but I suppose that for a holiday home it is quite sufficiently equipped.”

“You own it, then?”

“Indirectly, yes.”

He decided against asking if it was the Van Dykes’. Knowing would serve no purpose. In socializing by Hannibal’s fireplace he had already crossed a moral border into some strange, unknown land. If he came to regret his adventure and find his way back, he’d better have a damn convincing story ready to feed the civilized world.

He considered this, pondering that it may already be too late—he had been painfully disloyal to Jack—and found that loneliness had kneaded him into an opportunist: right now he didn’t give a damn.

They had lapsed into silence. Hannibal appeared content just to watch him. Softened by the glow of the fire, the left side of his face radiated calm, astute confidence. Shadows were cast on the other half, giving a cruel edge to his features. Will found it difficult to broach the harsh topics that smoldered inside him without divulging that these days, he felt the same as Hannibal now appeared, split into man and beast.

He turned his head to stare at the flames licking at Juniper logs and spiced pine cones. The soft popping sounds and fragrances evoked associations of holiday cheer. In combination with the classical notes playing somewhere in the background, the scent contributed to that companionable atmosphere that he had once enjoyed and now realized was likely carefully construed to have that very effect.

“This piece is called ‘Arrival of the Birds’ by The Cinematic Orchestra,” Hannibal remarked, to some extent following his train of thought.

“It’s a little upbeat for you.”

Hannibal smiled. “You think I have atrociously old-fashioned taste in music, but this piece is in fact much younger than you are. I find that it beautifully conveys that feeling of subtle hope swelling into significant promise.”

Will unconsciously placed a hand over his abdomen, catching himself as soon as warmth started seeping through the fabric and into his scar. He casually moved his hand to smooth his shirt instead.

“How does it make you feel?” Hannibal asked.

Marked as yours. Will shifted in his chair, wetting his lips. “If your choice in music matches your current mood: wary. I’ve learned that our interests rarely align.” Meeting Hannibal’s gaze, he continued, “Is my being alive promising to you, Doctor, or rather…the prospect of rectifying your mistake?”

“You becoming collateral damage was never my design.” There was a hint of regret in his voice. “However, you must be favorably disposed toward me, because I don’t think it’s fear that made you come.”

“Fear?” Will huffed out an unbelieving laugh. It sounded bitter to his own ears. “No, no it’s not that.”

“Post traumatic stress disorder can be a debilitating and chronic condition. It’s not unusual for a sufferer to either avoid triggering situations altogether or face them by means of a last resort. But I’d argue that PTSD is a rare occurrence in predators.”

Will stared back at him. Randall Tier was on both their minds.

Hannibal leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “You came here because you want something. What is it that you want?” He tilted his head, the barest hint of mischief in his expression. “And how may I be of service?”

“Revenge?”

Will had counted on his intentions to slot into place upon seeing Hannibal, presenting themselves as a neatly gift-wrapped clear-cut plan. But here he sat, not unlike a puppy dog that waited for his master to feed him a cookie. It wouldn’t do.

Hannibal certainly seemed to suspect that he had a card up his sleeve. “You have become quite adept at setting parameters and measuring variables. I don’t underestimate you. So don't do me the discourtesy of beating around the bush.”

“Oh yes, I set parameters, measured variables and even planted a bunch of booby traps,” Will scoffed. “But in the end, you won all the same. Everyone is so confident that you fled the country. Hell, you even fooled me. Yet here you are, in the lion’s den, enjoying your food and your wine and your parties. But I can’t help but wonder…” he looked sharply at Hannibal, who remained expressionless save for a flicker of expectancy in his eyes. “Is you being here in Baltimore a result of reckless arrogance or brilliant strategism?”

“Perhaps a little bit of both. However, there’s a third possibility that you didn’t take into account.”

“And which one is that?”

“That I never won.” He didn’t elaborate, but his voice turned thoughtful. “I had anticipated it being difficult to persuade you into booking a flight to Europe to have dinner with me there. Hence,” he gestured at the room, “I took a calculated risk of exposure. I’m inclined to believe that may not have been necessary. You would have come for me, regardless of the distance.” Softly, he asked, “What has changed?”

Will thought that he knew what it felt like to be exposed, his social veneer already peeled off by Hannibal's menacing skill, the revealed dark matter beneath his exterior tugged at and played like the strings of a violin. But now frustration gave way to something more potent: rage.

Jaw set, he glared at Hannibal. He wouldn't have told a soul and no one would've been able to stop him. He'd have boarded that flight to follow Hannibal to the corners of the Earth.

And for that alone, he suddenly longed to pound his fist into that composed face, over and over again until he drew blood, snot and spit. Above all, though, he wanted to evoke a raw, real reaction. He wanted to grab Hannibal by his flashy silk tie, choke him, and devour his agony with his mouth to punish him for the unhinged, yearning creature that he had cultivated.

Will blinked. His eyes fell upon his hands, which were tightly gripping the chair. Breath coming in shallow puffs, he pried loose his fingers. His nails had left half moons in the leather. He was not ready to meet Hannibal's gaze. Instead, he stared at the coffee table with unfocused eyes. In his mind he tried to sense the telltale trail of some past serial killer infiltrating his thoughts and staining them with violence. He found none. Even Hobbs had slunk into the shadows.

He could blame Hannibal for pulling his strings in merciless curiosity, and nearly destroying his mind in the process. But these last few strands of normalcy and decency, he was unraveling all by himself.

"So." Jerking forward he grabbed his empty glass just to have something to hold onto and look at. "It's safe to say that everything has changed. You and me included. The question is: where do we take it from here?"

"Frankly, the possibilities are endless, depending on our starting point. Do you miss me, Will?"

His eyes snapped back to Hannibal, who was observing him with an intensity that made Will wonder how much of his inner turmoil he had detected.

The sensation of having bitten off more than he could chew washed over him. This was the man who had, for starters, stood by and watched in fascination as his brain was being deep-fried. He was not gambling with the FBI's reputation tonight, but with his life.

No, he was therefore on the verge of biting out, when his breath hitched. What had rarely been present during their former therapy sessions, or at least not so shockingly undisguised, was the brazen tenderness in Hannibal's eyes, far surpassing professional concern. In fact, Will could only recall one time when Hannibal had looked at him like that, dark eyes spilling over with genuine emotion.

Memories came rushing in and, heart rate climbing, his eyes instantly sought out Hannibal's hands. His breath shuddered out of him when he found them empty.

“I…” The self-preserving lie was lodged in his throat. He placed his glass on the coffee table and rose jerkily from his chair, too fast, so that black dots danced behind his eyelids and he had to grasp the leather back for support.

His scar nagged with phantom pain. He really should just go grab his coat and leave.

“Forgive me if I made you uncomfortable,” Hannibal provided soothingly. He followed Will’s example and stood too, but slowly, with his palms stretched out in an open gesture. “Why don’t you follow me? I’ll show you my wine collection and you can help me pick out a bottle for dinner.”

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Behind the scenes, the house was a carcass. Hannibal led him through lifeless hallways and past rows of closed oak doors, concealing what Will assumed were empty rooms. Just around a third corner was a small, shadowy staircase leading into the cellar. As they descended, the sound of Hannibal’s Oxfords reverberated against the brick walls, echoing back at them.

Only after Hannibal opened the steel door at the end of the stairs, flicked on the fluorescent lights, and allowed him with a nod to go first did Will breathe easily. In the cellar the air was cool and silent, the scent of cork overwhelming. He gave the neatly stacked wine collection that covered all three walls an uninterested once-over.

“I’m not sure if I should be relieved or disappointed that you brought me here,” he said. “No one died here.”

“Always so difficult to impress.” There was a smile in Hannibal’s voice. “Must one be a hedonist with a fondness for grand gestures to be worthy of your attention?”

“I’ll treat that as the rhetorical question I'm sure it was.”

“Actually, it’s only ever been a rumor that a devil lived in the cellar. It says so on the bottle.”

“This must be the only place in this house that's appropriate for your *inclinations*. So my guess is that you’re either not acclimatized to your new life yet or that this really is just a holiday home. But after tonight, after having *me* here, you’re not planning on coming back.” Will narrowed his eyes. “Why is that?”

“It will have served its purpose.” Hannibal leaned toward the wine rack, closing his thumb and index finger around the neck of a bottle of Sake. He pulled it forward to analyze its label. As he did his lips formed a pensive pout that Will found himself staring at.

Dismissing the bottle for the next, Hannibal spoke softly, without looking up. “Why did you pick that bottle, Will? Were you merely trying to goad me or does it serve a purpose, too? Do you,” he shifted his maroon colored eyes to him, “wish to rekindle our relationship?”

“Who knows?” But Hannibal’s frankness had startled him and he scrambled for words, deciding on sarcasm. “Maybe I was trying to provoke you because I miss your unconventional love declarations.”

The atmosphere changed then.

Hannibal straightened, his eyes fixated on Will. In the shifting mood and the tomb-like silence of the cellar, Will’s mocking words echoed with a terrifying authenticity. He would breathe them back and forcefully swallow them down if he could.

Attuned to Hannibal’s every movement, Will caught the twitch of muscle, the moment Hannibal decided against closing the distance and simply looked at him.

“Your death would have been unbearable.”

Will sucked in a breath. Every cell in his body thrilled into action. His old self urged him to abort whatever his destructive mission entailed. He hesitated only a few frantic heartbeats before he took what felt like a leap into the abyss: “Then my answer to your earlier question is ‘yes’.”

For several long seconds his words hung heavy between them, interspersed only by the sound of Will’s breathing, loud and ragged to his own ears.

“Me too.”

Hannibal stayed at the periphery of Will’s space, but in the small room his presence was domineering all the same. These days Will’s eyes no longer fled from his stare, but it was hard not to look away now. Hannibal’s eyes were vivid and flared with something wild. And they were drinking him in, searching his face for affirmation, lingering on what Will knew were the tense lines of his mouth, before finally settling on his eyes.

“Will,” he said.

There it is, Will thought, and he laughed. Another teacup on the verge of being remade, or his to shatter beyond repair. And he sensed that Hannibal knew it too.

“What’s for dinner?” he asked, turning toward the door.

Chapter 2

Stepping into Hannibal's dining room had always struck Will as though he were entering some sacred place where he, in his ill-fitting clothes and with his unruly curls, had no business being. Holiday home or not, tonight was no exception. It was evident that Hannibal had devoted most of his time to this room, having decorated it tastefully in his signature grayscale. Drawn curtains shut out the darkness. The lighting was a soft, golden hue. The room was slightly warmer than the rest of the house. Will wouldn't have been surprised to encounter another wall of living green.

However, something was different. And it had nothing to do with this being another house, another room. Eyes zeroing in on the table, he noted with slight bewilderment that it was not set in its usual extravagance with the finest china, crystal and centuries-old silver. Apart from the double damask tablecloth, only a set of glasses and a carafe were placed on the table. He gave Hannibal an inquiring look.

Hannibal smiled a secret smile as he pulled out a chair and sat in it, facing Will, who was still standing in the doorway uneasily.

"You're not sitting at the head of the table?" Will didn't try to keep the suspicion out of his voice.

"No, I will sit here tonight."

"So where do I sit?" He took a step forward, eyeing the table dubiously.

"Actually, taking a seat won't be necessary. You are for dinner tonight, Will."

"Making do with what you have in these trying times?" Will scoffed. Instinctively, his eyes swept the room and landed on the carafe. *Adequate*. It would probably suffice to smash those cheekbones. The carafe was also right in front of Hannibal. Maybe if he made a lunge for it...

Amusement sparked in Hannibal's eyes. "Ferocity becomes you…" he started, then stopped himself. "Please forgive me for teasing you! I assure you that my comment was meant in a figurative rather than a literal sense."

Taking in Will's wary expression, he continued, "Tourism, hygienic regulations and mere time have eroded and contorted the practice into the gimmick it sadly is today, but Nyotaimori, or Nantaimori in this instance, was once considered an act of great sensualism and celebration. Put succinctly, I've prepared a variety of Japanese dishes, and the presentation may seem quite unorthodox to you at first. "

"You're going to honor every part of me Japanese-style, is that it?" Will muttered, more chagrined than worried. There was a whole range of mental disorders and near-death traumas that he could blame for his lack of appropriate fear in the company of the Chesapeake Ripper.

Hannibal was noticeably affronted. “On the contrary. I intend this to be a pleasurable experience for both of us. However, I do not want to do anything against your wishes. So if you're not comfortable, I could serve dinner in a more conventional way and we could talk, as friends.”

“Friends.” Will snorted, but Hannibal’s effort to *comfort* him had piqued his interest. To let the evening unfold exactly as he had planned, Hannibal apparently desired his cooperation.

He was unable to resist. Seeking out Hannibal with a cautious tendril of empathy, he briefly sampled only the faintest contours of his possible motives, mindful not to get deluged by his powerful mind.

The thrill of pursuit, of a worthwhile chase, seeped into his own mind. His eyes widening, Will caught himself before he could voice his bafflement. He could sense Hannibal’s obvious desire to hunt him and court him and eat him and have him. His thoughts were a whirlwind of heady possibilities now that Will was here with him.

But he had not expected this cruel, calculating man’s approach to depend on his choice. Hannibal, who took lives depending on how well-stocked his fridge was, for some reason wanted his assent in this. Will sensed that this made Hannibal uncomfortable, that he found his position almost unacceptably vulnerable. He was *nervous*.

Will hesitated for a moment, both shaken and fascinated. He schooled his voice into careful neutrality. “Alright, what’s the plan?”

Hannibal twisted around in his chair to retrieve something from one of the other chairs. A small pillow. “I’d like you to climb on the table and lie on your back. You can put this pillow under your head.”

Will looked dubious for only a moment, then shrugged. “It's your table.” He casually leaned his hip into the table to test its sturdiness. It didn't budge. “Don’t you want me to take off my shoes though?”

“Yes. In fact...I can’t bear you wearing those clothes any longer, please take them off as well,” Hannibal instructed, echoing Will’s earlier thoughts about his appearance.

Will froze midway through taking off his shoes. He was unsure whether to laugh at the absurdity of Hannibal’s request or be offended, because with his legs elegantly crossed and his expression aloof, Hannibal sat there looking the exact opposite of a man who would ask him to strip.

If not for his empathy he would have missed it completely, but he wasn’t fooled now. He identified Hannibal’s stilted demeanor for what it was: tension. His agreement meant a lot more to Hannibal than he had led him to believe.

The difficulty was that he wasn’t sure whether to feel alarmed or smugly satisfied that Hannibal was this affected by his decision.

“What *exactly* does Nantai— that thing entail?”

“Nantaimori. Quite literally it stands for adorning the body of a man, but it’s as much a form of art as it is about creating a memorable dining experience. There are many variations in tradition, and the West has adopted a diluted version of serving generic sushi on models wrapped in cling film.” Hannibal smiled derisively at the travesty of this, showing a hint of sharp, uneven teeth. “I prefer your body heat to complement taste and texture, and to dine directly from your skin.”

Will reached blindly for his glass, forgetting that it was not yet filled with Sake.

Without equivocation, Hannibal said, “I would consider it a honor to feast upon your body, Will. I hope you will permit me.”

Throat parched, Will considered driving home. It would take a lot more than his dogs happily drooling over him for his equilibrium to return, but it would be a start. He also contemplated flipping Hannibal the finger for the suggestion alone—surely it was in bad taste to ask the guy you’d gutted to show you his naked ass—and then drive home. The only constant in both scenarios was leaving the dining room *immediately*, in the latter case possibly with a missing limb.

There was a third scenario. Lifting clammy hands to his throat, he started unbuttoning his shirt. His Adam’s apple moved painfully when he swallowed.

Hannibal’s tongue darted out to wet his lips. He did not speak, but looked at Will with new intensity.

Will unbuttoned the cuffs on his shirt last. He fingered them clumsily, hyperaware of Hannibal’s scrutiny, until they popped through their openings. Then he stood barechested with his shirt loosely draped around him, his body an offering. Food for psychiatrists, that's what he was. He huffed out a shaky laugh.

“Something is amusing,” Hannibal said gently.

“You. Me,” was all he said.

“Incredibly so,” Hannibal agreed dryly, watching the shirt slip from his shoulders. Will could virtually feel Hannibal tracing the slight flush that began at his throat and unfurled on his chest. Hannibal’s gaze mapped his body and dipped low suddenly, having discovered the marring scar. The light spilled golden on Will’s skin, doing little to disguise its irregular, puckered contours. Hannibal’s face showed no remorse. To Will’s relief, he didn’t insult him with an apology.

Hannibal looked up. “It’s an interesting position we find ourselves in, is it not?”

“I once told Jack,” Will said pensively, shoving his shoes under the table with a socked foot, “that it’s hard to shake off something that’s already under your skin. I was wrong though. It proves impossible.”

“I’m glad.”

Will smirked at the madness of encountering a man who hadn't his best interests in mind—who had deceived, framed and attempted to kill him—and due to reasons he had yet to comprehend, he still found himself on board this doomed ship.

“Your pants, please,” Hannibal said.

“Right.”

There was no way to make this less awkward, so Will worked quickly to keep his discomfort at bay. He unbuckled his belt, pulled it through the loops and dropped it in the nearest chair. Next, he unzipped his pants and pushed them down his thighs. He almost expected Hannibal to tell him to go slower, but he remained silent.

He stepped out of his pants, picked them up and folded them neatly over the back of the chair, more for Hannibal’s sake than his own. His socks followed suit.

Down to his boxers, Will’s efficiency faltered. He peeked down at himself. He couldn’t describe his skin a shade of hospital pale, not when the favorable lighting adorned it. But his bare feet looked forlorn on the classic hardwood floor. It hit him that he was one thin piece of clothing away from standing butt naked in the opulence of Hannibal’s dining room.

Somehow it was a humbling experience. And once that occurred to him, he began to feel foolish. If there had been a hypnotic quality to his situation it started to quiver now, slowly slipping away like a dream disturbed by harsh daylight filtering through the curtains.

Caught in a twilight zone, where both moving forward and back-pedaling held little appeal, he glanced at Hannibal in helpless annoyance. Hannibal looked, rather unhelpfully, utterly dignified in spite of having taken off his suit jacket. The double Windsor radiated quiet triumph, its dimple adding insult to injury.

Will began to suspect that he was actually insane for indulging Hannibal like this, and that some sort of self-preserving action was called for.

Hannibal interrupted his train of thought before it could gain traction.

“I propose a toast. You can lie down on the table when you're finished. I will return shortly.”

It turned out to be fractionally easier to strip off his boxers after Hannibal had retreated into the kitchen. He put them on the chair with his belt, out of plain sight. Following Hannibal’s suggestion, he climbed awkwardly onto the table, grateful that the wasn’t being observed.

Once he was on his back, he found that he could stretch himself out easily. He lowered his head onto the pillow that Hannibal had provided and waited. His cock rested in the crook of his thigh. Imagining Hannibal’s delight when he found him stark naked on his dinner table but protecting his modesty was enough incentive to resist covering himself with his hands. He put his arms by his side and allowed his restless fingers to stroke the patterns on the tablecloth.

Realistically, he should have a few ideas about where this Nantaimori stunt might be headed. He had two. The problem was that they were in striking contrast. He couldn't predict if he would come undone or come full circle tonight.

Apart from this, physically he was surprisingly comfortable. Hannibal had layered several tablecloths under the double damask one, so the table didn't press into his shoulder blades and pelvis. He now also understood why the room's temperature was higher than in the rest of the house; it must have been turned up a few notches in advance.

"Ever the gentleman," he muttered under his breath.

Hannibal took his time. With a building sense of fatality, Will waited. He was well aware that his alternative would be to dress hastily and make a run for it. The rise and fall of his rib cage was the only movement in the room and it was revealing; his breaths came just a little too fast for his liking. He scanned the ceiling for a dirty spot to focus on, as was his habit at the dentist when trying to distract himself, but found none.

What kept the man? Was he having trouble selecting the best knife to cut sinewy meat?

Balancing a serving tray in each hand, Hannibal reappeared in the room. Will turned his head on the pillow and watched those eyes land upon him. A distinctly wolfish smile tugged at the corners of Hannibal's mouth when he found Will exactly where and how he wanted him: he must be pleased as punch.

"What an exceptional man you are," he told Will with perplexing sincerity.

The funny and, granted, fairly depressing thing was that the women Will had slept with had never reacted like this to his naked form. For all his shrouded intent, Hannibal's reasons infinitely more complicated than those of a bed partner, his praise made Will's skin flush anew.

He dismissed it by joking, "I'd say so. I didn't run," and pushed himself up on his elbows when Hannibal placed both trays at his side on the table.

There was some cutlery: a type of fork, chopsticks, and a single fish knife—not unlike a scalpel—that his eyes were glued to instantly. Instead, he forced himself to study the large lidded opaque bowls and small jars. They must contain a variety of dishes and gave very little away but for a faint spicy smell.

"What's in all these?" he gestured.

"It's all seafood. You will like it." Hannibal poured a generous amount of Sake into their cups. "And I appreciate that you decided not to run."

"Yeah well, keep the champagne on ice for now. Besides, as crazy as it may sound, this time it's not the food that I'm worried about but the—what did you call it—*experience*."

"Don't be. All you have to do is lie back and let me feed you. There doesn't have to be any more to it than that." Hannibal handed Will his cup and lifted his own with both hands.

“*Otsukaresama desu*.”

The implication of Hannibal's words sank in, and Will suddenly found himself craving another drink. “Cheers.” Etiquette be damned, he took a large gulp, only barely registering the floral, ricey aroma.

Will placed his half empty cup back on the table and said, “You didn't eat much when the Van Dykes were here.”

“Neither did you.”

He snorted. “I was anticipating having you all to myself.”

“So was I. I’d rather not have invited George and Amalia at all, but I assumed that you might appreciate the opportunity to adjust in a non-threatening environment.”

Hannibal started uncovering several dishes. Will spotted a colorful assortment of what looked like sashimi on ice. He also recognized soy sauce, wasabi, and sesame oil. But Hannibal’s skill was most obvious in the unfamiliar looking food that, to Will, appeared various states of edible. He was tempted to ask for California rolls with a large scoop of mayonnaise just to taunt Hannibal.

“I see. And now you’re working hard to remedy that.” He looked down deliberately at his body. “You made sure to deal yourself the better cards tonight.”

“Associating our natural state with vulnerability is ingrained in mankind. But if you consider it, there actually is a vast difference in perception between being naked and being nude, as you are now. The first is deemed a vulnerable state, stripped of your disguise and defenses. The latter, on the other hand, is a display of the human body for celebration, appreciation, and art.”

“Says the man with a walk-in closet full of three-piece suits.”

Hannibal laughed charmingly. “The night is still young.”

“I’ll just play the hand I’ve been dealt.”

“I expect nothing else from you.”

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Will gasped, abdominal muscles tensing when Hannibal placed several ice-cold, wafer-thin strips of white fish from his solar plexus to his navel.

He couldn’t help stating the obvious: “Those are freezing!”

Hannibal dragged his gaze away from the displayed fish that rose and fell along with Will's breathing.

"Yes, but watch," he said.

Will had the odd feeling that Hannibal was not at all watching the fish become translucent and almost liquid due to the heat of his body, but was instead transfixed on his nipples. Even so, Will obediently looked at how the fish melted on his skin, like butter in a frying pan.

When Hannibal brought his hand to Will's body, thumb and index finger stretched out, he felt himself tighten with expectancy. He was convinced that Hannibal would capture and roll a taut nipple between his fingertips.

Lifting a slice of fish from his body, Hannibal offered it to Will. Will blinked. Lips already parted in anticipation, he only had to open his mouth further to let Hannibal slowly place the thin piece between his lips. The flesh fell apart on his tongue in an explosion of creamy brine.

Hannibal tipped his own head back to lower a slice into his mouth. He momentarily closed his eyes, savoring the flavor, then swallowed. Will watched him from underneath his lashes and marveled at his aristocratic profile, though with his appetites the man himself could never be described as noble.

But Will couldn't deny that Hannibal was refined. It would have been banally straightforward and *effective* for Hannibal to touch him teasingly, but his fingers, glistening with liquid salt, never once brushed Will's lips as he fed him another slice, and then a last.

Despite, or perhaps because of that, Will's nerves were humming with trepidation, incredibly receptive to Hannibal's every brief, cursory touch. *Sins of omission*. They shared that, he thought severely. For all Hannibal's talk about Nantaimori being an act of sensuality, Will felt more naked than nude.

And Hannibal had neglected to mention another association with being naked, which he now discovered. Intimacy. Maybe it was an unforeseen side effect.

He sighed, knowing perfectly well that nothing was accidental with Hannibal.

"Lie very still," Hannibal warned him then, and poured a syrupy sauce into his navel, warm as blood.

He tensed regardless. Some of the liquid spilled over his belly.

"Sorry."

Hannibal slid a finger across his stomach to catch the syrup, slow enough for Will's body to register it as a caress. He shifted uneasily, feeling like the one guy without sunglasses at a poker game, his every twitch and jitter magnified. But if Hannibal interpreted the signs, he politely kept his findings to himself. Will thought grimly that he was was probably too busy enjoying having him splayed out and at his mercy to pay much heed to his edginess.

With slightly narrowed eyes, he watched Hannibal bring a sauce-soaked finger to his own mouth and casually suck it clean. Will stared at his tongue flicking out to discreetly catch a drop that threatened to glide down his knuckle. Belatedly, he noted that Hannibal was observing him as intently as Will did him.

Clearing his throat, he said, “Inventive cup. So what’s the sauce for?”

“Odori ebi,” Hannibal replied. He picked up a prawn from a bowl with water, and plunged it into his Sake. With practiced ease, he then cracked open its translucent shell and dipped its tail into Will’s navel. Holding it by the head, he offered the prawn to Will. Will caught the crispy meat between his teeth and beheaded the prawn with one bite. He was about to chew when the prawn jumped inside his mouth, and jumped again. Instinctively he bit down.

“It’s alive?!” he exclaimed, speaking around the meat.

“Yes. That’s why they’re called dancing shrimp. Preparing live seafood is called Ikizukuri. It is justifiably popular in Japan and other Asian countries.” Hannibal bit off a prawn’s head and popped it into his mouth, feet still rotating.

“Of course you’d be a fan,” Will groaned. He slowly lifted his head from the pillow to down the last drops of Sake in his cup and chase away the taste of the living creature.

“I promise you that I’m not attempting to forcefully broaden your palate.” Hannibal refilled their cups. “You must eat oysters?”

Will nodded.

“They, too, are very much alive when you eat them raw. Let’s rejoice in the fact that I contemplated preparing Sannakji but decided against it. It’s not wise to eat live octopus when you’re somewhat intoxicated. Its suction cups have a tendency to attach themselves to your tongue and throat. They can and have choked people to death.”

He smiled at Will’s repulsed expression. “And here I was certain that you would delight in the idea of a victim dragging its killer with him into death.”

Will smirked and nodded. “I do like a happy ending.”

“Technically, it’s a Korean dish, so it wouldn’t have been appropriate for tonight’s theme. What is appropriate, however,” Hannibal said, cheerfully lifting a finger, which triggered instant concern in Will. “I’ll show you now. If you’ll excuse me for a moment, I have to bring it in from the kitchen.”

“Okay, can I just…” He started to get up, entirely forgetting the cooling sauce in his navel. A remnant of it ran stickily down his trail of hair, slowly coming to a clotting halt at his groin. For the first time tonight, or more precisely, for the first time ever, Hannibal’s attention was completely and solely on his cock.

“My apologies,” Hannibal said swiftly. “Of course I’ll clean you up first.”

For one or two seconds, Will was completely motionless.

Then he jerked into action, saying that it was no problem, he could do it himself, when Hannibal placed a warm hand on his chest and told him to lie back. The sudden solid contact after a night of the most fleeting of touches was enough to shock Will into compliance.

Hannibal placed both hands on the table and leaned forward, so that his head hung above Will's belly. His hair fell over his forehead, and Will irrationally feared that it might brush his scar. Hannibal assessed him as if he were contemplating performing a medical procedure.

"You've gotten yourself into quite a situation."

Warm breath tickled Will's skin, causing the little hairs there to prickle. It robbed him, ironically, of his own ability to breathe. He might have protested, but a rising roar in his ears drowned out all sounds except Hannibal's calm voice that demonstrated that he was impervious to Will's embarrassment.

He tore his gaze away from those plush lips and their closeness to his groin and looked up at the ceiling, thinking that they had made a terrible mistake ever letting him out of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. Immobilized by indecisiveness, he groaned. Then he managed, "Why don't you...go get whatever it is you were going to get from the kitchen, and let me get rid off this stuff."

A warm wetness slid over his skin.

Will let out his breath in an explosive gasp, fingers clawing at the tablecloth.

"What the—" he hissed, when he couldn't make sense of the sensation. Rationally, he thought it would be Hannibal's tongue licking a confident stripe along the contours of his happy trail, firing up a junction of nerves as he went. But it wasn't.

He stole a surreptitious glance down. Hannibal had produced a handkerchief, wet it in his mouth, and was now attempting to wipe him clean.

"The problem with this sauce," Hannibal said, "is that when it thins and dries, it develops properties not unlike resin. Its location is therefore somewhat unfortunate."

Is it? He didn't say. "I'll live. Just let it be. I'll take a shower. When I get home."

"No, I won't inconvenience you like that. After all, it was my mistake. And I believe this might do the trick."

He drenched his handkerchief in Sake and proceeded to rub gentle circles over the gluey hairs of Will's happy trail, following it to the outlines of his pubic hair.

It was a dangerous course of action. One that might have had a certain comical quality if Will had not lain there, equal parts nonplussed and entranced. Holding his breath until it hurt, he was fixated on how Hannibal's fingers grazed his skin. His belly trembled, muscles constricting of their own volition. He had trouble processing that Hannibal was actually, honest to God, caressing him like a lover would, only with cool detachment.

And he knew in that instant, as if his empathy were whispering it menacingly into his ear, that things were about to get worse.

Because after a night of puzzling signals and inattention, it was with a mixture of horror and resignation that he felt his cock begin to fill with blood. It rose as Hannibal removed the last traces of sauce with alcohol, his handkerchief nuzzling Will's groin.

He slammed his head back against the pillow and bit hard on his lip, tasting a hint of metal. He feverishly summoned images of the Chesapeake Ripper's crime scenes. They came easily, already burned into his retina. When that proved to no avail, he tried imagining the contents of Hannibal's fridge.

He could literally be moments away from Hannibal slicing and dicing his flesh into meat cubes in a cruel parody of Ikizukuri, and his body decided that now was the right time to react?

"Are you kidding me?" he whispered, inaudible over the unobtrusive background music. Any moment now Hannibal would cease his perfectly perfunctory attentions and stand back to take in the full and hard proof of Will's insanity. He would turn to Will with the ghost of a smirk on his otherwise infuriatingly composed face and say, *how does this make you feel?*

There was no compromise to make, no bargain to strike. All he had was a choice, and that choice would determine his path toward remaining a man or becoming the beast. Even though the consequences were beyond both their comprehension, Hannibal had been clear earlier: it was his choice to make.

"I had better go." He pushed himself up and scrambled off the table.

Or, that would have been his plan if Hannibal had not grabbed him by his thighs and tugged.

Will cried out in surprise when he was dragged sideways. His arms shot out instinctively, flailing, searching for something to hold onto. Bowls were sent flying; soy sauce poured over the table. One of the trays crashed onto the wooden floor. Fingers pressed into his flesh, turning his skin an immediate mottled, angry red. Layers of tablecloth were pulled along with him when Hannibal yanked him toward the table's edge.

He was pinned into place. Panting hard, more from exertion than in actual consternation, Will managed to struggle into a sitting position. He dug his hands into the creased heap of tablecloths behind his back for support, but his legs dangled from the table uselessly. Between them, towering in front of him, stood Hannibal.

Chapter 3

Will tipped his head back and met Hannibal's steady gaze.

"I would prefer that you stay for dessert," Hannibal said resolutely. Only his hair falling over his forehead betrayed his previous explosive bout of activity. But a severity had come over him. It had banished all traces of sophistication. He hadn't let go of Will. He was still touching him, hands splayed boldly on his thighs.

Will looked down at Hannibal's hands and stared. Their impudence made those earlier discreet touches dissolve into an impossible, hazy daydream. He was *caught* and that had shifted the balance from him being a potential mate to him being prey. In Hannibal's eyes, he had run.

He had made his choice.

"I must apologize though." There was a huskiness in Hannibal's voice. No wonder; Will knew what he must look like: a banquet of flushed and aroused flesh served on a *goddamn* dinner table. And Hannibal didn't hide his appreciation as he took in the sight with hooded eyes, lingering on flaming skin before dipping lower. Will swallowed hard.

"I'd love to hear it," he ground out.

"I can't imagine a finer revenge than you leaving now, after you've given me a glimpse of what could be." His voice was tinged with regret. "But I'm afraid I can't let you claim your victory, Will."

Hannibal's eyes left him to search the chaos of the table behind him. Apparently, he didn't find what he was looking for, because his eyes then swept over the mess of cutlery, broken bowls, food and pools of melted ice on the floor.

Will sought out one of the table's sturdy legs and placed his foot against it for support. He sneered, "And so another one of your caterpillars will meet its untimely end?"

Hannibal lifted his hands from his thighs. "You are no less a caterpillar now than I am. It would be a dangerous error of judgment to regard you as such." After what seemed a brief hesitation, he brought his hands to Will's face. Will forced himself not to pull away.

Deceptively gentle, Hannibal took his head firmly between his warm palms. "But due to the impartial and arbitrary brutality of life, even the most magnificent butterfly can be trapped in amber before it's had a chance to test its wings. I never wanted that for you, but..."

Fingers sank into the flesh below his scruffy jaw. Will knew what would come next. He'd seen Hannibal break a neck before with professional detachment.

"Some teacups aren't meant to be men—."

“Shame!” he snarled. “Because I have *just* what you’re looking for.”

Moving in a blur, Will used the table leg to propel himself forward. He swung his arm through the air; in his hand, the steel blade of the fish knife captured the light

He caught Hannibal off-guard. With no chance to react, let alone snap Will’s neck, he staggered back. Will crashed into him, the impact of his weight taking them both to the floor. Hannibal’s breath was knocked out of him as his back slammed against the hardwood floor. Will landed on top of him, knees hitting the ground on either side of Hannibal’s waist.

But Hannibal recovered quickly. Anticipating the possibility of Will going straight for his throat, he brought up his arm in self-defense, the other going for the knife. Will grinned. As tempting—*righteous*—as it would be to avenge Abigail by slashing his throat, he knew Hannibal would suspect it. Instead, he made the most of the momentum, aware that Hannibal could easily overpower him once he gained the upper hand. He changed the knife’s course at the last instant, coming at Hannibal from a lower angle.

Naturally, Hannibal’s knives were only ever of the deadliest quality and, in one long, smooth motion, Will slashed through the vest and shirt from navel to chest, slicing through the top layer of flesh as he went. Blood welled between them instantly, drenching the tatters of Hannibal’s clothes in a satisfying crimson.

“I have fantasized about this moment,” he told Hannibal, smirking down at him. He pressed the knife threateningly into graying chest hair.

Hannibal hissed in pain. “Me too.” His voice was hoarse—and God—it was incredible to Will that *he* had caused that. “Though I must admit you weren’t on top in my fantasy.”

“I figured as much.”

Will let the knife travel upwards and hooked it behind the paisley tie, effectively ruining the double Windsor, and exposing the whole of Hannibal’s throat. “That’s better,” he murmured. “I hope you’ll agree that you were a *tad* overdressed, given the circumstances?”

“You could have just said the magic word.” With predatory swiftness, Hannibal captured his wrist. Will felt as though his bones were being crushed to powder as Hannibal tried to force him to drop the knife. His other hand closed around Will’s throat in a death grip. He then stretched out his arm and slowly, as if he were lifting a dumbbell off his chest, pushed Will’s upper body into the air.

Will saw himself reflected in Hannibal’s eyes, futilely gasping for air.

“I wouldn’t have denied you,” Hannibal said.

With his air cut off, Will could only grunt. He instinctively clawed at Hannibal’s chokehold with his free hand, trying to pry loose his fingers. When that failed, he focused on his weapon. With effort he stretched out his knife arm, aiming at the delicate hollow of Hannibal’s throat. Fighting against Hannibal’s hold on his wrist, he urged the sharp tip of his knife into flesh.

He was grateful for the extension that the knife offered, but from his perilous position he still couldn't do much more than deliver a few harmless pricks. His muscles started to shake uncontrollably, on the verge of surrendering to Hannibal's power.

He used the meager advantage of his position to push his weight forward. His knees slid back on the polished floor. Hannibal's arm gave slightly, bending at the elbow. It was enough. With numb fingers, Will slid the fish knife a little deeper into the man's throat. Hannibal made a sound somewhere between a ragged breath and a moan.

"Yield," Will choked out, lightheaded. Vision blurred, he could just make out the blood seeping from the cut he'd inflicted, pooling beautifully in the dip of Hannibal's throat.

Hannibal slowly uncurled his fingers. He let his body go slack beneath Will.

In between taking big gulps of air Will laughed raspily. "Well?" his voice cracked. "You wanted me to embrace my nature, Doctor. How does it feel to fall victim to your own games?"

"It's true that I enjoy helping you reach your full potential. And so far I quite enjoy the show."

Will grinned. "Glad to hear you're not a sore loser."

Hannibal just looked at him expectantly.

Will relaxed his grip on the knife somewhat. He wondered if Hannibal was coaxing him into exploring his "nature" some more or merely manipulating him into *thinking* that he was being coaxed. He shrugged inwardly. It didn't matter. All he wanted was to revel in the sweet surrealism of the moment. He went with what felt good.

With only the tip of the knife he grazed the surface of Hannibal's skin, left to right, right to left, in a cruel mockery of slashing his throat. He looked down at Hannibal searchingly. If the man was worried about his fate, it didn't show; his features were still arresting in their sinister composure.

Eyes fixed on Hannibal's face, Will let the knife flick out in every direction along his throat. Before long, there was a fine web of shallow cuts etched into Hannibal's skin, filling with thin lines of blood.

Will glanced down. "Hmm, I bet you wish you'd taught me to draw instead of to kill?"

"From my viewpoint, you appear to be doing both rather well. Are you using my suprasternal notch as an inkwell?"

Smiling, Will shook his head. *Hannibal*. It was almost too much, too heady an experience, to have Hannibal beneath him and at his mercy. Bloodied and disheveled, he was a sight to behold. Will wanted nothing more than to linger in this moment. He didn't want to think about logistics and irrevocable decisions. But he was not a sadist, and he didn't want to become one. So he wasn't going to play with his prey.

Except he already had.

He slid a finger over the knife's blade, absentmindedly smearing a trace of Hannibal's blood over its length. The parallels with that other night were with him, tempting him to re-enact at least part of it, righting wrongs. But he realized that he would never come full circle. Not without Abigail here. There was a faint throbbing at his temples. Uneasily, he strengthened his grasp of the handle and studied Hannibal's throat.

"Will you not use your hands?" Hannibal's voice was low and curious.

The question took him by surprise and snapped him out of his thoughts. He met Hannibal's eyes, and sucked a breath in sharply. Hannibal's pupils were blown wide, dark with hunger and longing.

Will found that he couldn't look away. In defiance of his hardness, his cruel defects, his narcissism, Hannibal's gaze enveloped him with the warmth of his admiration.

A strange sense of understanding came over Will, and he had to say it out loud, dragging the words into the unforgiving open. "You knew I wasn't going to run."

Softly, "Yes."

In that instant it dawned on him. He saw it clearly now. Not only had Hannibal seen straight through his trickery—his announcement that he was going to leave, made only to gain leverage—Hannibal's desire to be his *friend* had never been anything but a gross distortion of the truth. Frowning deeply, unbelieving, "You..."

He should be appalled by the approval in Hannibal's eyes. Part of him was. But more than anything he was stunned by how it made him feel. Worthy.

"Say it," he demanded. "I want to hear you say it."

"I had no use for that knife. I brought it to the table for you to use."

"Against you?"

"No. For you. You deserve to be given a true choice. And if you will not choose me, a chance at a clean kill or an honest death. There is a fate worse than death for a predator as beautiful as you. It is merely surviving."

"You were willing to sacrifice yourself for me." He frowned in bewilderment. As his own words sank in, his chest felt too tight. His body was a bundle of misfiring nerves and conflicting sensations.

They studied each other. A small rivulet of Hannibal's blood ran down his throat and trickled onto the floor. Hannibal slowly brought up his hands, his deadly hands, and rested them against Will's cheeks.

Will let Hannibal's thumb stroke fond circles over his ears. He didn't loosen his grip on the knife. He didn't tear his eyes away from Hannibal's, looking instead into their disquieting

depths.

When Hannibal spoke again, his voice was hoarse but sure. “For both of us. You are my city, Will. If you live, I must always pursue you.”

This was an outrageous, abominable moment that was never meant to transpire between them.

The knife clattered to the floor.

“Kiss me,” Will said harshly.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will kissed recklessly, unconcerned with clashing teeth and too much tongue. He was driven by impulse instead. It therefore took some adjusting when Hannibal followed his lead with unhurried greediness, seemingly intent on exploring Will's mouth as attentively and thoroughly as he did everything else.

Initially, he was helpless against the wet softness of Hannibal's lips. But while carving into people might have been "business as usual" for Hannibal, Will was high on adrenaline. He'd drawn blood, and this very moment he could smell the pungent, rusty scent of it on Hannibal's warm skin. He longed to taste not only Hannibal's mouth, but all of him.

Pulling away, he lowered his head and, before he could think better of it, touched Hannibal's sticky throat with the hesitant tip of his tongue. Above him, Hannibal gasped and wound his fingers into Will's hair, clasping his skull. Will's movements faltered, as he feared he'd gone too far. His stomach clenched in nervous uncertainty. No normal person would have done this. He had no idea what had overcome him either, and if he welcomed the changes or was repulsed by them.

He expected Hannibal to pull him up and put an end to his tentative venture.

When Hannibal simply held him instead, Will slowly exhaled and lifted his head a fraction to study him. Catching Will's slightly bashful expression, Hannibal made a small sound of surprise. He brought his other hand up to Will's head too, combing through his curls before gently pushing him down with both hands. Hannibal tipped his head back invitingly.

Will's breath hitched. He couldn't name the emotions that ran through him. He was overwhelmed. Dazed by Hannibal's approval, but in that moment requiring it.

Feeling torn, for several moments he only breathed in the scent of Hannibal's blood, mingled with his aftershave. Finally, he took a deep breath and licked a slow stripe over the whole length of his throat. Pushing his tongue along the seam of a shallow cut, he coated his lips and tongue in blood. He could feel every beat of Hannibal's pulse beneath his tongue like his own. Above him, Hannibal threw his head against the floor and groaned.

He relished the solid pressure and guidance of Hannibal's hands as he slid the flat of his tongue all the way along Hannibal's throat, until he reached his flawlessly shaven chin. The soft noises that Hannibal made vibrated against him. Blood rolled over his taste buds and glazed his palate, the flavor both syrupy sweet and musty. He pressed his groin firmly against Hannibal's, hungry for more contact.

Hannibal tugged at his hair, urging him up. When Will obliged, Hannibal crashed their mouths together. This time, his kiss wasn't measured and thoughtful. It was all teeth and tongue and possessiveness. Will growled into it.

“Will you live?” Will breathed, when they broke apart.

Hannibal slowly opened his eyes. The skin around his mouth was rosy from Will’s stubble. Will couldn’t look anywhere else.

“Long enough.” Hannibal showed sharp teeth when he smiled. How could anyone have failed to see the killer in him?

“*Good*,” he said. “Because I’m taking you up on your offer of dessert.” He pushed himself up and sat back, straddling Hannibal’s hips. Instinctively knowing not to interfere, Hannibal watched as Will lined up his cock against the telltale bulge in his pinstriped pants.

Handling the knife had already left Will hard. He was sure Hannibal had noticed. He made sure that Hannibal noticed now. He grabbed hold of Hannibal’s cock through his pants and rubbed himself against him, smearing the fabric with precome, officially rendering another piece of the suit beyond repair.

“*Will*,” Hannibal said, sounding pained, “there is a limit to my patience.”

“You left me dangling for months. It’s only fair that you get a taste of your own medicine.” But when he looked up, he noticed the dents in Hannibal’s bottom lip from where he’d worried it between his teeth, and he changed his mind.

“Your clothes need to come off.” He sat back on Hannibal’s thighs, placed both hands on his belt and looked pointedly at the knife, which lay nearby. “Are you going to do it yourself or do you want me to *help*?”

“Help me, please.”

When Will, not having expected that answer, made no immediate move, Hannibal leaned sideways. He slowly stretched out his hand to the knife, eyes remaining focused on Will. Will tensed imperceptibly, fingertips digging maybe a fraction too hard into Hannibal’s waist as he fought the instinct to try to stop him. Hannibal’s fingers skimmed the floor, then they found and closed around the knife’s handle.

In Will’s mind, images fought to replace each other. Knife and knife, pain and lust, past and present all blurred together. He knew that in that moment, Hannibal shared his memory.

Handle first, Hannibal offered him the knife.

Will sighed in quiet relief. “Thank you,” he said thickly.

He scooted forward to work at removing Hannibal’s remaining clothes, grinding against his groin as he did, enjoying Hannibal’s soft hiss. He grabbed a fistful of Hannibal’s vest, held together by only one button, and unceremoniously cut through the fabric. Next, he cut through his shirt, careful not to do further damage to the body underneath now that his plans for it had changed.

Impatiently, he watched Hannibal shrug out of the tattered remains. Golden cuff-links skipped across the floor. Fresh, bright red blood trickled thinly down his abdomen, where

only the beginnings of a paunch betrayed his decadent lifestyle. Hannibal didn't seem concerned about his wounds, and so neither was Will. He smirked. One day, he should have Hannibal show him how to gut someone properly.

He placed the knife beside them on the floor and climbed off Hannibal to remove his shoes and socks. Hannibal helpfully lifted his hips as Will roughly dragged his pants and black boxer briefs down his legs.

A bead of moisture had gathered at the tip of Hannibal's cock. As Will watched, it grew larger, swelling into a transparent drop. He bent to touch it with his tongue, then took the head into his mouth, marveling at the smooth, sleek feel, and the way the foreskin withdrew curiously beneath his lips.

It had been years since he'd done this. But just like meeting Hannibal again had been inevitable, he felt that this moment, too, had always been destined.

Above him, Hannibal was saying his name repeatedly in a low, gravelly tone. Traces of an accent had seeped into his voice, and Will shivered at the need in it. He gave Hannibal's cock one last lick before straddling him again. He started to lower himself carefully, knees sliding farther apart on the floor as he guided Hannibal's cock with his hand. When the thickness of it nudged his hole, he inhaled sharply and started to push himself down onto it.

"*Wait*." Hannibal pushed himself up into a sitting position and placed a hand on Will's thigh. "I am actually in possession of a bed. And lubricant."

Hannibal's bed. He shied away from the idea. They were not *lovers*, were they? This was… not a hate fuck exactly. A goodbye, perhaps. Painful, punishing and unforgettable, as it should be. "Too much fuss," he replied.

Hannibal's mouth curled into a wolfish smile. "Then we will negotiate. If my bed and lubricant are hard limits for you, and I prefer not to fuck you hastily on the floor, then I propose that we make use of the sesame oil and retire to the furs in front of the fireplace."

"I...yes, okay. Sesame oil, though?" Will told himself that he had opted for the safest and easiest way out because he knew how much Hannibal normally loved these discussions. But really, it was Hannibal's casual use of the word "fuck" that had momentarily disarmed him.

Hannibal looked smug. "It rolled underneath the table. Go ahead, I'll get it." He nodded toward the living room.

"Oh, Will?"

"Yeah?"

"If you wish to stay in control, you shouldn't forget to take that knife."

Hannibal said nothing when he left it behind.

***

The fire was burning low, the furs thick and warm, and Will felt flustered. He wasn't sure how to position himself, so he just sat down with his knees drawn up and watched Hannibal approach. In the dim wavering light, with his broad blood-streaked chest and his darkened eyes, he looked fierce. Lethal. A crimson line trailed down his torso toward his straining cock.

Hannibal could fill out a suit perfectly, but Will decided that this was how he liked him best. His true nature was on display. The notion that he was *lucky* crept up on Will, as uninvited as it was unsettling.

Amusement curled Hannibal's lip. Even more as Will's eyes landed on the small bottle and the tiny jar that he held in his hand. He dismissed the jar by dropping it into the furs. Will stared at the bottle, then back up at Hannibal. His whole body thrummed. The silence was palpable, and he opened his mouth to make some nonsensical comment, when Hannibal broke it.

"Come here."

There was a promise in his words, but more than that, a command. Will swallowed, fighting back conflicting emotions, the persistent traces of his old self. He rose to his feet. Slowly, he walked toward Hannibal, focusing on his unwavering eyes. Hannibal was so certain of himself, of them. Will let him close the final distance.

Hannibal brought his hand up to Will's cheek and lightly stroked it with his fingertips. "I hope you're sure about your decision not to bring the knife, because I'm going to demand everything of you," he said roughly, his voice accented. "And in return, you'll have all of me."

"Try me," Will countered.

A small smile crept up on Hannibal's face. It was the only warning Will received before he was thrown onto the floor.

He landed with a grunt, the furs only slightly cushioning the blow. Hannibal had followed him to the floor and now loomed over him. With the fire flickering behind his back, he appeared to be made from shadows and embers.

Will tried to press himself up against Hannibal, curling his fingers around his biceps hard enough for his short nails to leave angry marks. In response, Hannibal shoved Will down as he pulled away, then grabbed his hips and lifted him off the furs. He flipped him over so that he landed on his belly, his cock captured between his stomach and the fur.

"Spread your legs. I want to see you." Hannibal knelt behind him and stroked the insides of his thighs. There was crusted blood on his palms. It scrubbed Will's skin like salt.

Will shivered. He did as Hannibal said, then breathed hard into the fur when Hannibal nudged his legs farther apart with his knees.

“I must draw you like this,” Hannibal murmured.

Will didn’t have to look over his shoulder to know that there was awe in Hannibal’s expression. He definitely got it now, the distinction between nakedness and nudity. “Some other time. Come on. Get on with it.”

Will heard the scraping sound of a cap being unscrewed, and he tensed in anticipation. He realized that the prospect of Hannibal’s affection made him warier than his cruelty. He wouldn’t be able to handle gentle lovemaking, not now, but he couldn’t bring himself to ask.

He needn’t have worried. Hannibal pulled him up and against his groin, so that he was on all fours. With warm hands he kneaded his ass, then spread him open. He rubbed an oiled thumb over Will’s hole and pushed it inside. Will let out a raw, shocked sound at the unfamiliar intrusion.

Hannibal slid his thumb in and out a few more times, until everything was slick and slippery with oil. Will bit his lip, trying to remain silent. Nerves he’d forgotten he had were buzzing with sensation. He was so hard that he *had* to reach down and touch. Shifting his weight to his left side, he lifted his hand off the fur and slid his fingers over his erection, coating the head in precome.

Suddenly, Hannibal’s oiled cock bluntly nudged his hole. With a gasp, Will withdrew his hand, focusing instead on unclenching anxious muscles. A shiver ran through him.

Hannibal said his name and stroked his rib-cage as though Will were an animal that needed encouragement. Then he pushed against the resistance and edged into Will with a long, slow slide.

He was careful—Will sensed that he was—but only to the extent that he wouldn’t do real damage. Hannibal gave him no time to adjust to the impossible stretch. It was too much, too soon. Will was stretched beyond capacity; he felt too full of Hannibal. He hissed at the invasion and jolted forward, his erection wilting.

Hannibal took no pity at all. “You can handle it,” he said, voice low and confident. He slid an arm under Will’s heaving ribs to hold him up and pull him back against him. “You can handle *me*, Will.”

Oddly, it was Hannibal’s voice that did it. The admiration again, the absolute certainty that he was not some unstable creature that required a gentle hand. *Hannibal*. Something flickered deep inside him. Hannibal wasn’t bound by a societal straitjacket. His was the thrill, the hunt, the climaxes and all the sharp edges of life. To Will, he was an *ideal* after all.

He had come here tonight to stake his claim.

“Yes,” he agreed simply, feeling overwhelmed.

Hannibal started to thrust into him with subtle brutality, fucking him in smooth, short strokes.

All thought fled Will's mind. He had no words for this. It was all new to him: the rhythm, the heat, the hurt, the sudden, unexpected spikes of pleasure every time Hannibal hit him just right. He gave in to Hannibal, and pushed back against him. Flesh slapped against sensitized flesh. His cock slowly hardened, until it curved up against his belly.

He didn't realize that he was making sounds, raw gasps and moans, until Hannibal's voice joined his. "Do you see now? My beautiful predator." His voice was a rough caress, an extension of his cock, dragging inexorably along every nerve inside Will.

"Oh God," he shuddered, and he looked over his shoulder to satisfy the incredulous part of him that couldn't believe that he and Hannibal were actually doing this.

A sheen of perspiration covered Hannibal's face and hairy chest. Muscles shifted under his rust-streaked skin as he rocked into him. His lips were dark and parted. Hair fell over his forehead. For all his carefully cultivated and sophisticated demeanor, here was the beast, Will thought, and he had lured it out of him. Just as Hannibal had lured it out of Will.

When Hannibal caught his gaze, Will said, "Touch me." It came out more like a sob. "*Please*."

Hannibal leaned forward to grab him by his shoulder, and pulled him back against the damp heat of his body. He draped a possessive arm around him and roughly cupped his chin, forcing his head sideways so that Will had no choice but to look at him. He brought up his other hand and held it before Will. "Spit," he ordered.

Will obeyed, after which Hannibal closed his spit-slick hand around his cock. Will cried out, bucking his hips.

"See how it can be between us?" Hannibal breathed harshly, and hot against his cheek.

Will moaned. There was a desperation in both of them. He could smell it in the air. Sweat, musk and blood. It seemed to Will that they belonged to another world, destined to suffer and be destroyed by each other, and be all the more alive because of it.

"Will." Hannibal sank his teeth into the junction between Will's neck and shoulder, hard.

The words spilled out breathlessly. "Fuck. Hannibal..."

"I want to mark you everywhere and in every way imaginable. With my hands, my teeth, with my cock. But only if you will permit me. Only if I have you."

"You already did. And here I am..."

"You are." A promise. Hannibal's fingers scraped noisily on his jaw and throat, then dug into his flesh. At the same time, he tightened his grip on Will's cock, his thumb sliding into Will's slick slit with his every thrust.

Will was close. So close. His mind was on the verge of blacking out. He clenched his unpracticed muscles around Hannibal's hot, insistent flesh. He felt the burn and drag deep inside his body. It felt like being conquered. His eyelids fluttered closed.

Hannibal made a strained sound. His hips snapped forward, then his rhythm stuttered. He tensed and pressed his fingers into Will's throat as he did, choking him slowly. Will couldn't breathe, but panic was strangely absent. He blinked open his eyes. Hannibal's face floated in front of him, a collection of harsh planes and magnificent cheekbones. He looked like a killer. Not a demon, but an avenging angel of death.

Will stared at him through watery eyes, breath-starved and gasping reflexively. An epiphany: no one could compare and compete. The thought still resonated in his mind as it started to shut down. He could feel Hannibal spill deep inside him. Then they were falling forward and he, too, was coming.

Chapter End Notes

The final bit will follow shortly. Thank you for the encouraging comments and kudos!^^ Till a next fic, maybe.

Chapter 5

A curl stuck sweatily to Will's forehead. As far as he could see, his body was a crime scene: skin flushed and damp, a blotchy spectacle of emerging bruises, smears of rust and teeth marks. Stretched out on his back in front of the fireplace, he watched Hannibal fussing around him. He'd brought him a glass of water and had swept a washcloth over him. Currently, he was treating the bite mark he'd inflicted, even though he had barely punctured the skin.

Will relaxed into his touch. Leisurely, he said, "So you never brought that last dish from the kitchen. I'm morbidly curious about what bullet I dodged."

Hannibal's ministrations didn't falter, but he smiled. "Dessert looked too good to resist any longer," he said, fondly pinching Will in the ribs. "I had intended to serve us Fugu liver. Fugu is a highly poisonous pufferfish that, if not prepared with great care, will paralyze its otherwise conscious victim, resulting in asphyxiation. Interestingly, its defense is also its downfall."

Will lazily quirked an eyebrow.

"Since we humans are drawn to flirting with death, Fugu is in high demand regardless of its bland taste. With the exception of the delectable, but extremely toxic liver."

"To varying degrees, we're all little moths seeking a flame." Will smiled wryly. "One of your favorite human traits, I'm sure."

Hannibal put his medical supplies back in their kit. "Actually, yes. It's also this trait that explains why the liver acquired its cult status after it was banned in Japan."

"And you were going to share that poisonous little snack with me and see where the chips would fall? You're an old-school romantic."

Hannibal nodded, looking at Will. Then his eyes fell on his scar and his expression sobered. "You understand that what we have done, some would argue is immoral or even nefarious? With me, you will be destined for a life on the run."

"Two one way tickets to the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane are probably in order."

"I need to know that you are fully aware, knowing who I am and—"

"... and *what* you are. What *I* am. Yes, I'm aware of our eventual fate. But when you killed me that night I discovered something about myself." He swallowed. "I discovered that there's a terrible comfort in dying, in disintegrating into nothingness. Everything that I would never have been able to process during this lifetime... it simply dissolved when I bled out on your floor. Even…even Abigail."

He averted his gaze and watched the flames for what felt like a long time before he looked back at Hannibal. “Do you want to know why I’m still glad I lived?”

Hannibal waited.

“I’m glad because until you disappeared, I didn’t realize that you had offered me absolution. This time, I will disappear with you.”

Hannibal looked at him as if he were something precious. “Together we can set this city ablaze.”

“...and destroy it everywhere else in the world. Yes.”

Their eyes locked.

After a moment, Will said, “You orchestrated this night to perfection. I’ll have to give you that.” His expression turned sly. “But let’s not ignore the fact that me bringing that bottle was the brilliant move that finally made you turn up your game a notch after pining for me forever, my *friend*.”

“The devil is in the details.” Hannibal’s laugh was rich and low. He reached behind Will before pulling him into his arms. He dragged his mouth along stubble and veins and then lower, mapping Will’s chest with his lips. It felt surprisingly good, Hannibal nuzzling him.

“Mmm.” Hannibal flicked a nipple with the tip of his tongue until it hardened, then targeted the other one. Will arched into his touch. “Nice,” he murmured, feeling sated. The burn registered a moment later. Suddenly, his nipples were blisteringly hot.

“Ahh, that stings!” he exclaimed, pulling out of Hannibal’s embrace.

He stared down at his chest, finding his nipples reddened and swollen. He touched them gingerly, narrowing his eyes. “What have you done?”

Hannibal took a sip of water. “I suppose I may have accidentally had some Wasabi before finding something much more to my liking.”

Will followed Hannibal’s gaze to the unobtrusive tiny jar that lay mostly obscured at the edge of the furs.

“You sadist.”

“I have indulged you. If I’d smeared Wasabi directly onto your nipples, you’d have felt my wrath for days.” Pleasantly, he said, “Keep that in mind next time you feel tempted to beat me at my own game. Now, if you say ‘please’, I may be persuaded into bringing you some ice.”

“You’re going to be the death of me,” Will muttered.

“Unquestionably.” Hannibal grasped his chin and, smiling predatorily, firmly drew him into a kiss. Into Will’s mouth he murmured, “And you will be mine. But, much like with Fugu, I’m

completely unable to resist the appeal.”

The end.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!